

The Mask of Maria Pia

Dona Selig

ALTHOUGH it is said that the passage of time tends to dull the emotional reaction to events of the past, it is still with trepidation that I reopen the doors of memory on the days of my youth and the time of my marriage to the Black Duke. However, in the interest of those who will follow after me, and in order that they shall avoid the pitfalls that plagued my path, I shall endeavor to set down in concise, chronological order the events that led up to the fall of the Castle Diedra and what shall be, with my death, the extinction of the House of Anzalone.

I was born on the Island of Ibiza in the Mediterranean Sea in the year of our Lord 1647. I spent my early childhood at play with my older sister Angelique on the warm, sandy beaches of our estate. My father was the middle son of a well-to-do Catalonian family who had shown such aptitude at his studies that he had been accepted at court and eventually appointed governor of our island. My mother was of French descent, and it was from her that I inherited the curse of fair hair and blue eyes.

When I was sixteen years old, my tutor was dismissed as it was, in those times, not considered proper for young ladies to be too well educated. In his place my father hired old Maria Pia to act as duenna for Angelique and me. It was with the advent of the old woman that I first felt the terror that was to become the living essence of my life and from which, today, I see no escape save death. It was Maria Pia who brought the forces of evil into our contented home and turned it into a shrine for the celebration of the Black Mass.

It all began with the sudden illness of Angelique. She had always had the dark, vibrant beauty of my father's people and the energy and industry typical of the native Catalonian. Now, suddenly, she became pale and listless, preferring her couch in the shade of the olive trees to the sunny beaches by the sea. Where before she had been the instigator of merriment at our supper table, now she preferred to have Maria Pia bring her a tray in the quiet of her apartments. The thing which really caused us alarm, however, was her refusal to accept the court of Don Percio Hernandez, a young man for whose attentions she had shown a marked desire in the past.

It was in the festival days before the celebration of Lent that I sat in the large chamber that we shared, reading to Angelique from the works of the English poet, Shakespeare. Suddenly our father knocked at the door and asked to be admitted. I hurriedly spread a coverlet over Angelique, who had thrown back the drapes as it was exceedingly warm, and begged him to enter. Maria Pia, who had been mending a lace shawl, rose and curtsied as he came through the door, then slipped behind the portier onto the balcony. From this

vantage point she could hear all that transpired without being observed.

"Good morning, Bianca," he nodded to me; then, crossing the room, he picked up the wan hand of Angelique and seated himself on the edge of her bed. "How is my Spanish rose this fine morning?" He patted the hand and smiled into the dark eyes.

"I am fine, Father, only a bit tired. Perhaps I should not have spent so much time over my rosary this morning, for my knees are truly weak. This evening I shall tell my beads from my bed." Angelique touched the cross that hung on the beads about a carved point on the head of our bed. "I have prayed often for the return of my strength, and I am sure Our Good Lady will listen to my entreaties."

Father bowed his head. "If she does not heed the prayers of such as you, Angelique, then I should believe that Heaven is ruled by the devil."

As he spoke the blasphemous words, a sudden breeze whipped the curtains from before the balcony, and for a moment I beheld a face of such venomous evil that I did not realize for the time that I had looked behind the mask of Maria Pia.

Theme and Variation

Jane Bachman

THE air clung hot and sticky when Marie went back to work that evening. She still had one story to write before the Thursday morning deadline and was trying to finish as quickly as possible.

About 6 o'clock that same evening, just around the corner, Mr. Fink, or Shah as he was called by the townspeople, was transferring his money from the cash register to a little bag.

"Not much here, Mama," he called. "People do not interest themselves in oriental rugs even in a resort town." He sighed to Mrs. Fink as she padded up behind him in gray felt slippers.

"Never mind, Papa. We will make out," she smiled. He patted her plump, dark hand and hustled off to put the money in the safe. As he stooped to open the door, he heard a small rustling noise.

"Mama, we've got mice again. Come and listen," he called. Mrs. Fink did. Then she took the Shah's hand and quickly led him outside.

Mr. Blair ran lightly downstairs from the apartment into the office of the theater. He dabbed his forehead with a limp handkerchief and wished he could afford air conditioning in the apartment